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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses testing of the disadvantaged and the possibilities for new approaches to the problem. The black community's resistance to testing and the legal implications of employment and educational discrimination which results from testing are discussed. The objections to testing the disadvantaged are reviewed. At the end, it is hoped that other criteria than test scores will be used for university admission and employment. (Author/JW)

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TESTING OF THE DISADVANTAGED:

NEW OPPORTUNITIES

by

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Commenting on the progress of testing over the span of the last twenty years, Thorndike (1971) likens it to an iceberg. He writes, "The part that shows as change is the one-ninth of the berg that is above water level, and the part that remains much the same is the vast underwater bulk" (P.3). Indeed, it is true that a review of the first (1951) and second (1971) editions of Educational Measurement reveals impressively the continuity of thought and the comprehensiveness of coverage.

Nevertheless, in spite of the scholarship and critical inquiry in the area of testing done by researchers of competence and integrity, testing of the disadvantaged can be claimed by no one to be a satisfactory accomplishment. At the national level, federal agencies such as the Office of Federal Contract Compliance and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (Executive Order No. 11246) have taken vigorous actions in bringing to an end testing practices that discriminate unfairly against a set of affected classes, e.g. blacks, Indians, females, Puerto Ricans. Within academic circles, vestigial remains of the nature nurture argument are quite apparent (Jensen 1969, 1971 and Hebb 1970, 1971). Consider too, the implications of hereditability which Jensen seems only dimly to understand.

From various spokesmen in the black community (Williams 1970) can be heard angry protests against the continued testing of black children. Within legal forums (Columbia Law Review 1968, Harvard Law Review 1971) debates are only beginning about the legal

implications of employment and educational discrimination through testing. Witness the concluding remarks in the Columbia Law Review:

> "The field of testing presents new problems for the law, problems which are only now beginning to obtrude on the legal consciousness. The discussion in this Note has focused on the remedies of a Negro applicant against an employer or educational institution using standardized tests as part of its selection process. The assumption has been that tests, despite their drawbacks, are an improvement over the conventional "subjective" techniques. Whether this is a correct assumption is debatable. The best of tests have a validity coefficient of only .5. One must add to that the very real problems of discrimination, the technical difficulties in conducting adequate validation studies, the practical and legal problems of differential scoring; one is left with the uneasy sensation that perhaps tests are not worth the trouble. Advocates of testing point to the objectivity of tests as a check against the personal prejudices of interviewers and hiring personnel. Tests, however, introduce their own element of racial bias, and their results can provide a smoke screen for those who wish to discriminate. An employer of seven hundred who selects applicants by interview and recommendations alone will find the absence of Negro workers harder to explain than one who can point

to a record of poor test scores to explain Negro rejections. The low level of legal sophistication concerning tests adds to their usefulness as a smoke screen.

It is too early to conclude that regulation cannot ensure fairness to all applicants. But it is likewise too early to deny the possibility that the technical difficulties will prove overwhelming. It is to be hoped that testing techniques can be sufficiently refined to produce legally acceptable results. Otherwise regulation in this area may ultimately give way to prohibition" (Pp. 743-744).

Most recently Mr. Chief Justice Berger in delivering the opinion of the Supreme Court, which reversed the opinion of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit which itself had reversed the findings of the District Court, stated:

> "Nothing in the Act precludes the use of testing or measuring procedures; obviously they are useful. What Congress has forbidden is giving these devices the mechanisms controlling force unless they are demonstrably a reasonable measure of job performance. Congress has not commanded that the less qualified be preferred over the better qualified simply because of minority origins. Far from disparaging job qualifications as such, Congress has made such qualifications

> the controlling factor, so that race, religion, nationality, and sex become irrelevant. What Congress has commanded is that any tests used must measure the person for the job and not the person in the abstract.
>
> The judgment of the Court of Appeals is, as to that portion of the judgment appealed from, reversed" (Pp. 11-12).

On the basis of this cursory review, it seems fair to say that there is noticeable social concern about testing particularly as it effects the disadvantaged. One must ask, why? Why, has there been such widespread public clamor about testing? And why has there been relatively little attempt by psychologists, be they purists or practitioners to articulate creative and constructive responses to a widespread social concern? By way of contrast, one can readily observe the volumes of debate relating to projective testing, national information systems, clinical and actuarial prediction and whose interests ought to be served by APA Central Office. But, only with marked difficulty can one glean from the professional literature a professional concern with the social consequences of testing. In this regard, although I eschew this overused comparison, physicists relative to psychologists have voiced a louder and more persistent concern over the social consequences of their scientific products. Maybe there is something to be learned from physics after all.

Permit me, then, a journalist privilege when I claim there is a crisis of confidence that exists between psychologists and the public they serve. Further, I do not think that such a crises is bad. Indeed, like sputniks of another year, the soaring criticisms of tests and testing may provide a most remarkable opportunity for searching review and significant program changes.

Pause for a moment and consider an array of events which are related to our dilemma. Critics of testing have argued persuasively that the tests are invalid or discriminate unfairly when used with the disadvantaged. It is not difficult to secure data to support this claim. Nor is it difficult to find statements of warning by qualified experts concerning this possibility. Consider Cureton's (1951) remarks:

> "If a vocabulary test is given to a group of eighth grade children all of whom have had fairly equal and fairly considerable opportunities and incentives to learn the meanings of printed words throughout their educational careers, and all of whom come from homes which are more or less similar in their general cultural characteristics, the test is likely to be a reasonable valid indicator of verbal intelligence. If it is given to a group of eighth grade children whose educational backgrounds are very dissimilar, it may be more valid as an indicator of instruction in reading than as an indicator of verbal intelligence." (Pp.621-622)

Or again recall Thorndike's (1963) comments:

> "The middle-class social background emphasizes striving and achievement, and the importance of academic success, in a way that the lower-class environment does not. And certainly the expectations of society and the values of the group itself differ in many subtle ways for the Caucasian and the Negro" (P. 19).

As Thorndike (1971) points out elsewhere some of the objections to achievement tests in particular can be overcome if the "...tests are used not as screening devices but as measures of the outcomes of education..." (P. 12).

In summary, the single most objectionable issue voiced by litigants, black psychologists and legal authouities is the "gate keeper" quality in test use.

But, related to the objection of tests as a screening device is a more fundamental fact namely the perpetuation of ignorance about disadvantaged individuals and the effects of environmental deprivation. The perpetuation of ignorance in some cases has been institutionalized and fostered by graduate schools, journal editors and governmental granting agencies. In fairness, I must agree with Thorndike (1971) when he states that the evidence on fairness in testing minority groups "... is meagre in part because previous pressures to avoid discrimination had made it difficult to get evidence on tests and training or job performance separately for different religious or ethnic subgroups within a group of students

or employees" (P.12).

But, review any decade of issues of your favorite psychological journal and observe the care with which human subjects are described in the methodology portion of the report. Not only does one come away guessing, but also it would be something of a small achievement to find mention of the inclusion of minority group members in the study. If one also counted the percentage of studies financed by government funds, one is likely to conclude as I have, that only a small portion if any of public monies is used to study the disadvantaged. Typically, in dissertation abstracts which I have read, the investigator defines and selects a subject sample of convenience and excludes those subjects who somehow don't measure up. This practice engaged in by the candidates for the doctorate, sanctioned by faculty committees, accepted by journal editors and financed by government agencies should be discontinued forthwith.

In general, the full domain of functioning of a variety of psychological variables such as attitudes, anxiety, anger and depression is unknown. It is my observation that systemmatic study of these and other variables has been avoided because psychologists less imbued with scientific inquiry but responsive to the lures of convenience and financing have permitted it to be thay way. It seems to me that testing programs and test construction necessarily must falter when designed for the disadvantaged because the relevant variables are at best dimly understood. There are no hard data about them. To this extent, the type of program of construct

validation delineated by Cronbach (1971, Pp.443-507) is a must if we ever are to understand in a more comprehensive way relevant and fundamental things about people and the contexts in which they live.

With renewed attention to validation procedure, concepts long taken for granted invite review. The notion of "standardized administration," "standardized testing condition" and "standardization group" merit particular attention. The act of guessing and instructions to inhibit or to encourage it, need critical examination. These variables are singled out on the basis of professional and public evidence that the disadvantaged relative to the advantaged do in fact demonstrate lower reading skills. This would suggest that a disadvantaged youngster is not likely to be responsive to subtle verbal cues present in the test, and items written for clarity of expression for the advantaged pupil may be as sterile and uninviting to the disadvantaged student as Swedish lute fisk is to the average American. Against what standard is he to be compared? For whose benefit has the standard been defined? The notion of a "standard" should not be allowed to remain sacrosanct nor easily defended by the threat that "...you are lowering the standards." Descrimination has many disguises, especially when objectives, educational or employment, are ill defined and resistive to adaptive change to serve the interests of students better. In brief, the view voiced here is much the same as that voiced by Schwarz (1971):

> "The need is for more complete information about the similarities and diversities of experience typical of applicant groups at various educational levels - for preliminary research that can guide item selection. Not enough is known, for example about the differences in English usage among American sub-cultures to evaluate their possible implications for the design of verbal aptitude tests" (P. 329).

Related to the paucity of knowledge about the personality and psychometric variables mentioned above is the minimal understanding of various cognitive and anthropological issues. A casual observer of various confrontations in which blacks and whites have been engaged can testify, I think, to the difference in perspective between the two groups on issues of "truth", "criteria for accepting evidence" and "confirmation procedures". Further, the condemnation of hypocrisy or deviation from accepted principles seems to differ in a multitude of discussions. I suspect that the determination of the set of clues or instances of confirmation while common place for one group are quite unacceptable for the other. Put another way, inclinations to believe bona fide authority, validation procedures or social "due process" are not invariant across ethnic groups. These differences I submit, have significance for instructional strategies.

During the years of debating regarding the intelligence of

blacks relative to whites of family structures particularly father absence versus father presence, seldom was it to be found that psychologists teamed with anthropologists, biologists and others to look at the relationships between religious heritage, food and eating habits and the array of psychological variables under scrutiny. It seems to me that there is a basic error in method of inquiry to assume that contextual variables of a wide array can be ignored in serious research whose objective it is to learn more about people. The observational neglect of religious phenomena in our culture, especially as it has functioned to sustain blacks in the past and its instrumental role during the life period of Martin Luther King, is just short of astonishing. Psychologists, I suspect, would profit from forming new research alliances and from learning new languages of research, especially some of those used by related disciplines such as anthropology, biology, sociology and even social philosophy. Such unions, I am convinced, present investigative opportunities which can and will be fruitful for all.

Finally, I must comment on a trend in public policy which may catch some psychologists out of step with the times. In the first edition of Educational Measurement, Chauncey and Frederiksen (1951 P.86) in their chapter entitled "Measurement in educational placement" wrote:

"Some state-supported colleges and universities

are required by law to accept all students who have been graduated from an accredited high school in that state. Mere graduation from high school, however, is insufficient evidence of ability to cope satisfactorily with college work, particularly since the standards of graduation vary from school to school. In such a situation the college must either lower its academic standards or each year fail a considerable number of students. Both these procedures, as well as a compromise solution, have been used in dealing with the problem. At some universities the problem has been met by setting up special courses, sometimes vocational in nature, for those students whose admission is required by law but who are unable to do "college-level" work."

It is interesting to compare the contents of a similarly labeled chapter in the second edition of Educational Measurement (1971) authored by John R. Hills entitled "Use of measurement in selection and placement" in which decision theory is discussed as a rationale for placement decisions. Unlike Chauncey and Frederiksen, Hills discusses the possibility of treatment modification which would be more responsive to the needs of students. One does not have to conclude that standards are lowered as Chauncey and Frederiksen state, but it may just be the case that colleges and universities have rigidly defended educational systems designed for the most part for middle class whites and oblivious to the differences inherent in other subcultural groups. The testing movement as articulated in

the activities of large testing organizations has reinforced the rigid notion of education of the intellectual elite. As a matter of convenience many if not most predictors of college success are correlated with grade point averages. And so college officials may pride themselves on maintaining stiff grading practices or lenient ones, but no where has it been demonstrated empirically that graduates of the elite schools with stiff grading practices are in fact of greater social value than those who do not have such experiences.

No college, to my knowledge, has developed an information system sufficient in scope to be able to document the relationships of its academic programs to more pervasive social criteria. The education industry is not in business for itself. It has a social mission and responsibility to aid a dynamic society to transmit knowledge, assist in the learning process and provide the essential conditions for systemmatic inquiry. While test-makers concern themselves with intermediate criteria such as grades and help maximize or inflate the self image of institutions the essential services to individuals are relegated to a second station.

The time is not yet that colleges and universities are forbidden to select on the basis of personality variables or diplomas. But, it is not inconceivable that such a time will arrive. Consider the cases of Meredith vs. Fair and Franklin vs. Parker discussed in the Columbia Law review (1968;P. 742)

In the Meredith case:

"(W)e now hold that the requirement of recommendations, whether from alumni or from citizens generally, attesting to an applicant's good moral character or recommending an applicant for admission, is unconstitutional when, as this case demonstrates, the burden falls more heavily on the Negroes than on whites. This is not to say, of course, that good moral character is not a reasonable test for admission."

In the Franklin case:

"On its face, and standing alone, the requirement of Auburn University concerning graduation from an accredited institution as a prerequisite to being admitted to Graduate School is unobjectionable and a reasonable rule for a college or university to adopt. However, the effect of the rule on Harold A. Franklin - an Alabama Negro - and others in his class who may be similarly situated, is necessarily to preclude him from securing a postgraduate education at Auburn University solely because the state of Alabama discriminated against him in its undergraduate schools. Such racial discrimination on the part of the State of Alabama amounts to a clear denial of equal protection of the laws. This is true regardless of the good motives or purposes that Auburn University may have concerning the rule in question".

It seems to me that there has been a commitment made in the

United States to change education from a privilege to a right in the same way that medical care has been and is being altered. Accordingly, excluding individuals is not the primary task, but discovering ways to help them is the order of the day. The myths of "college level" work need re-examination in light of this new mandate. Therefore the change must be one of gaining more knowledge about people and the ways in which they can be served. It is no longer sufficient to be content with a .5 validity coefficient, if it ever was.

Herein, lies opportunity and obligation to do better by way of the disadvantaged and the advantaged.

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